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[0001] The present invention relates methods of providing information over the Internet and more particularly relates to providing a user with a personalized Internet experience responsive to the user's interests and background.

[0003] In order to take advantage of the ability to reach certain consumers on the Internet, advertisers frequently profile users in order to estimate a user's interest in a particular product. These profiling techniques are often used to help an advertiser select a particular advertisement to be presented to a user. There presently exist many different profiling techniques including using hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP) information, digital identification, geographic information and demographic information.

[0005] U.S. Patent 6,009,410 to LeMole et al. discloses a system that presents customized advertisements to users on the

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[0018] By using Internet 102, a user is able to obtain access to a wide variety of web sites, such as by specifying the URL address of a desired web site or by conducting a key word search. A browser within the user-end terminal 100 sends a request over the Internet 102 to an identified Internet Service Provider (ISP) for that specific page. The requested page, as identified by the user-inputted URL address, is in turn transmitted back over the Internet 102 through IASP 104 to user-end terminal 100 for display on the user's terminal. By subsequently inputting a series of URL addresses manually through the browser or by clicking the user-end terminal's mouse on a hyperlink, or through a combination of both, the user is able to navigate through a wide variety of URL addressed pages of information at ISP 106 and any of the other ISPs, such as ISPs 108 and 110, connected to the Internet 102. Thus, a user may "surf the Net" in order to receive information, make on-line purchases and/or access on-line services.

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related to one or more users in database 128. The personal data may serve as an index for retrieving a profile on each user. The profile will preferably include information related to the user's interests, likes and preferences, such information being gathered by monitoring the user's Internet activities. Each time a user revisits the host web site 124, the host server 126 will operate to retrieve any new information available on the profiled user. As a result, the material transmitted by the host web site to the user at the user-end terminal 100 may be personalized and/or modified so that the material presented to the user is related to the user's Internet interests.

[0020] Referring to Figure 2, in accordance with one preferred embodiment of the present invention, a user visits a host web site 124 (Figure 1) at step 202. The host web site may provide a wide variety of information, such as the Internet web site having the URL SONYSTYLE.COM, owned and operated by Sony Electronics of America. At step 204, the user will be queried as to whether he or she wishes to register personal data to be stored by the host web site. Unlike prior art methods that obtain identifying information about a user without the user's knowledge or consent, the present invention will only seek to obtain information about the user if the user fully understands and authorizes such action.

[0021] If the user agrees to register personal data with the host web site, the host web site transmits a cookie via the Internet to the user's hardware. As used herein, the term "cookie" means information that a web site stores on a user's hard disk so that the web site can identify the user and/or retrieve information about the user at a later time. In other words, a cookie is information for future use that is stored by a server on the client's side of a client/server communication. Cookies are commonly used to rotate banner ads that a web site sends to a user so that the web site does not keep sending the same ad to the user. Cookies may also be used to customized

pages for a user based the user's browser type or other information that may have been provided to the web site.

[0022] If the user agrees to register personal data with the host web site, and after receiving the cookie from the host web site, the user must complete a personal data registration form at step 208. Referring to Figure 3, one preferred personalized data registration form 300 is shown therein. Personalized data form 300 includes areas for entering the user's name, address, zip, phone number, email address, age and occupation. However, preferred personalized data registration forms may also include other types of information commonly used to identify individuals, such as social security numbers or taxpayer identification codes.

[0023] After the personal data registration form has been completed, the information entered on the form by the user will be written onto the user's cookie at step 208. The personal data may then be transmitted to the host web site for storage in the database 128 of the host web site 124 (Fig. 1).

[0024] At step 212, the user "surfs the Net" by visiting other web sites. As used herein the terminology "surfs the Net" or "surfing the Net" means accessing web pages from various servers using the Internet. The other web sites or follow-on web sites may be accessed by typing the URLs for the various web sites into the hyper-text transfer protocol portion (HTTP) of a web page or by using a mouse to click on the hypertext links appearing on a web page. At step 214, the information related to the various web sites visited by the user is recorded in the user's cookie. At step 216, the user once again visits the host web site. At this time, the personal data stored in the user's cookie is transmitted to the host web site. The personal data of the user is used as an index for gaining access to the user's preference profile stored in database 128. Next, the user's content preferences stored in the cookie are compared to the user's profile previously stored in the database. If there are any differences between the information stored in the cookie and the

